



The scholarship of research in teacher education in a higher education institution in transition: Issues of identity

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines perceptions of professional and organizational identity of teacher educators in a 'new' University of Technology in South Africa, resulting from several recent mergers of colleges of education and colleges of technology mainly serving formerly disadvantaged students and schools. The findings show that most staff consider teaching and research as dichotomous. Research activities are seen to satisfy the institutional requirements for securing research funding and producing publications. Professional identities could be strengthened by a faculty-wide debate on the specific profile of teacher education in a University of Technology, resulting also in an agreed research ethos. Peer support in collaborative research groups with a focus on own practice is seen as an opportunity to strengthen research expertise.

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1. Introduction

An appropriate balance between different types of scholarships is vital for any viable tertiary institution. In his classic study on perceptions about the work of US academics, Boyer (1990) identified three forms of scholarships: teaching, research and service. This classical tripartite division applies equally to the work of teacher educators in academia in South Africa. In practice, the *scholarship of service* is nebulous and often limited to being mentioned in mission statements of higher education (HE) institutions. On the other hand, several tertiary education policy makers argue that all activities of South African teacher educators contribute to social reconstruction and development (Sayed, 2002), and thus that the scholarship of service encompasses the scholarships of research and teaching. Even so, it is largely NGOs and government policies that define the agenda for the scholarship of service with a focus on, for instance, human resource development, poverty alleviation and the public schooling crisis (HESA, 2006).

Historically, particular South African tertiary institutions have been classified as either teaching-oriented institutions or research-oriented institutions. Government policies (DoE, 2001) attempted to stimulate

a more balanced interpretation of scholarship at both the former research universities and teaching universities, by encouraging a diverse staff and student population, highlighting service learning in and with the community the institution is part of, and emphasising the link between equity and quality. In addition, several other tertiary institutions, such as Technikons (Colleges of Technology), Colleges of Education or Colleges of Agriculture, were amalgamated and awarded university status as a University of Technology. Teacher educators at such Universities of Technology have seen a considerable change in their role as academic member of staff. The purpose of this paper is to examine these teacher educators' perceptions with regards to research in a tertiary institution in transition.

The research questions addressed in the study are:

- i. What are the dynamics of the scholarship of research as perceived by teacher educators within a University of Technology?
- ii. How do these teacher educators perceive their role regarding the scholarship of research in comparison with the other scholarships in the academe?

2. Literature review

This study of teacher educators in a changing professional environment draws mainly on current knowledge of the roles of tertiary

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institutions in terms of the scholarship of research (Bazeley, 1994; Lucas, 2007; Sikes, 2006), and on findings related to perceptions of teacher educators of their identities in a context of change (Jenkins, Healey, & Zetter, 2007; Murray & Male, 2005; Zeichner, 2007). In this paper, Stryker's (2007) notion of identity salience is used to illustrate the tensions between the various identities of teacher educators.

2.1. Roles of tertiary institutions in terms of the scholarship of research

As mentioned above, Boyer (1990) identified three forms of scholarships: teaching, research and service. Research, in turn, can be seen to perform four functions in the academe, i.e. discovery, integration, application and dissemination. Research for discovery includes original and fundamental research resulting in the advancement of knowledge (Boyer, 1990:17). Research for integration involves connecting and synthesizing ideas across disciplines (p19). Application research involves assembling knowledge to address significant societal issues (p22) and research for dissemination involves transforming knowledge in order to bridge the gap between the scholar's understanding and the knowledge consumer (p24), for instance the student. This paper is based on the premise that all four functions are performed within the scholarship of research.

HE institutions across the world tend to place a high priority on research whilst relegating the scholarship of teaching to a subservient status. Marginson and Constadine (2000) write about the 'research power' in Australian universities where an academic's status is linked to the ability to bring in large amounts of research funding. Similarly, Tight (2000) contends that research success in UK universities has turned into a 'competitive sport'. The contrast between Bourdieu's (1988) notions of 'research capital' and 'academic capital' rings true for the South African system where the state rewards accredited research output with considerable funding (using the SAPSE formulae – South African Post School Education). The same applies to the prominence of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in the UK where research funding is a key criterion for the evaluation of universities, and for allocating subsequent funding. Murray (2008) notes that, ironically, 'new' universities (i.e. former colleges of education) in the UK could count initially on central funding for research, but after the 2001 RAE this funding has been withdrawn for most of them, with the risk that a new rift emerges between institutions providing teacher education, and those researching teacher education. Policy changes in university funding have impacted on the culture and values of academic life, and are the catalyst for the schism between research and other scholarships, like teaching and knowledge production, or what Bourdieu (1988) terms 'symbolic capital'. The recent fiscal imperative to academic work forces universities to become economically competitive. The neo-liberal ideologies of marketisation and new managerialism in universities (Lucas, 2006) allied with decreasing state funding makes higher education to seek funding mainly from the private sector. Policies similar to those in South Africa and the UK were implemented in Australia, Canada and the US (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997) as well as China, Hong Kong and Taiwan (Mok, 2003). All the countries mentioned have HE policies that emphasize academic capitalism, providing a prominent place to fund-generating applied research at the expense of basic or fundamental research (Lucas, 2006).

In circumstances where research funding by the private sector is limited, such as in teacher education in South Africa, it does not make economical sense to put a one-sided emphasis on research when a massive chunk of university funding comes from state subsidies which are related to student intake (Gibbs, 2002). The current massification of higher education in countries like the UK, India, and also South Africa, has led to increased student numbers and large class sizes (Sayed, 2002). It has resulted in a substantial

number of university students entering teacher education studies without the prerequisite academic preparation and this results in teacher educators placing emphasis on content teaching, instead of pedagogies, concomitant with 'over-teaching' and thus limited time and motivation for research (Jansen, 2001).

It is true that students benefit greatly from teaching that is based on sound research findings. However, a number of studies have shown that research productivity in teacher education does not really benefit teaching preparation directly. The two are either unrelated or very loosely related (Feldman, 1987; Hattie & Marsh, 1996; Ramsden & Moses, 1992). Housell (2002) provides evidence that teaching in research-led universities is not necessarily better, more effective or of higher quality than teaching in tertiary institutions geared towards other legitimate goals such as professional requirements. This is not to say that university teacher educators can abandon research to the benefit of teaching only. Good teaching requires firm research evidence on which to base the teaching (McLernon & Hugh, 2005). Housell (2002) points toward the fact that research evidence does not need to be produced directly by the teacher educators. Instead, teacher educators should be people capable of understanding and transferring knowledge adequately without necessarily producing it. This resonates with Boyer's (1990) functions of application, integration and dissemination. The academe should find ways of rewarding not only the researcher but also the teacher educator which makes the best use of research findings (Gibbs, 2002).

There is another reason for re-considering the role of the scholarship of research in teacher education in South Africa. The new *Higher Education Quality Framework* (DoE, 2007) has raised the standard of the undergraduate teaching degree (Bachelor of Education) from the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) Level 6 to Level 7. This brings the BEd on par with other four-year professional degrees with a large academic component as well as high standards of professional training, such as a BA (Fine Arts), BA (Social Work) and undergraduate degrees in the Health Sciences (e.g. Speech Therapy). For any of these degree programmes the academic component includes a sizeable research training, and this shift in the BEd degree will lead to re-defining the role of teacher educators in South Africa.

It is against this backdrop that this paper examines the dynamics of the scholarship of research in teacher education within a specific South African HE institution.

2.2. Teacher educators' perceptions of their roles

The *Norms and Standard for Educators* (DoE, 2000) is comprehensive and integrates the roles and competences outlined by four policy documents that emanated from the new political dispensation (National Department of Education Duties and Responsibilities of Educators; SA Council of Educators Code of Conduct; the Education Labour Relations Council Manual for Developmental Appraisal; and the Committee on Teacher Education Policy document). The *Norms and Standards for Educators* (DoE, 2000) is the key document that South African teacher educators use to benchmark their academic activities. The document identifies 'scholar, researcher and lifelong learner' as one of the seven roles appropriate for an initial teaching qualification: "The educator will achieve ongoing personal, academic, occupational and professional growth through reflective study and research in their learning area, in broader professional and educational matters, and in other related fields" (2000:13). This role may be made manifest through teaching, research and service and resonates with the notions of discovery – the commitment to knowledge for its own sake, to inquiry and investigation – and integration – making connections across the disciplines, creating new knowledge and interpreting data (Boyer, 1990:17–19).

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